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Teaching English Vocabulary: What International Language Educators Tell Us

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ABSTRACT

This descriptive study was motivated by Hunt's and Beglar's (2002) approaches to teaching vocabulary: incidental learning, explicit instruction, and independent strategy development in which they proposed seven principles of teaching vocabulary. Based on these principles, I designed 25 questionnaire items with a four-point Likert scale, and an open-ended item which sought information about problems in teaching vocabulary. The participants were English educators from different countries drawn from an online survey using a questionnaire through LinkedIn groups such as Applied Linguistics, ESL Teacher Professionals, iTeach English, and Group-digests. The participants were invited to respond to the questionnaire voluntarily following a weblink of the questionnaire in the SurveyMonkey.com. The data from the questionnaire were calculated in percentages of the number of participants who responded to the questionnaire items. The findings show that there were interesting differences of practice in teaching vocabulary with respect to Hunt's and Beglar's seven principles across teaching experiences of the participants, school levels, and learner status. Further examination of the participants' written responses to challenges in teaching vocabulary indicate that retention and motivation were the most frequently mentioned problems they had in teaching vocabulary.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

One of the teachers' concerns in teaching English vocabulary is how to teach it in a way that learners can understand and use the vocabulary appropriately. Techniques and strategies teachers use will determine how learners learn vocabulary. Good proficiency in English cannot be achieved without having sufficient amount of vocabulary knowledge. Discussions about techniques of teaching English vocabulary have appeared in many publications, however, a widely accepted view about the best way to teach vocabulary has not been reached. For the last decade, there have been two options for teaching English vocabulary; explicit instruction and incidental learning. Explicit instruction, among others, involves discussion about new words learners need to know, breaking words into their components parts such as teaching word formation, deliberate introduction of new words, and building fluency of new words. Incidental learning refers to acquiring new words through listening, reading, speaking, or writing practice. According to Nation (2002), English vocabulary should be taught systematically because the focus of teaching is essential for learning to take place. While Hunt and Beglar (2002), on the other hand, suggest that vocabulary should be taught in a way that combines both explicit and incidental learning and the strategies for learning vocabulary should be introduced to learners.

The different approaches to teaching vocabulary has led teachers to treat vocabulary teaching differently through various kinds of classroom tasks from presentation of words in a list to involvement of learners in collaborative activities.

All activities for English vocabulary learning are based on one major reason, that is, the acknowledgement of the importance of vocabulary in language learning. Vocabulary is an “important aspect of language development” (Nunan, 2001), “basic building blocks of language” (Brown, 2001), and unique to language acquisition (Wang, 2009). With this recognition, learners are advised to use various strategies in order to remember and use vocabularies in communication. Many methods have been implemented in a way that can produce the most effective results and the best retention.

Unlike today, the teaching of English vocabulary in the past did not receive much attention. Moir and Nation (2008) observed that many experts assumed it was not important to teach vocabularies because learners can learn words naturally, and therefore, learning vocabularies was not emphasized. For the past decade, the interest in teaching vocabulary has been increasing and the views of teaching vocabulary has significantly changed. Therefore, researchers have shown great interests to study this vast area. A similar interest has also been shown by language teachers who strive to find out effective techniques for teaching English vocabulary (Cohen & Macaro, 2007; Mizumoto & Takeuchi, 2009).

During the history of language teaching and learning, including that of vocabulary, the methods and techniques used have been various as a result of different approaches. Obvious changes can be seen in the way language teachers asking learners to memorize a set of words through rote learning to using words in meaningfully communicative contexts. This way of teaching does not view language learning as merely a process of habit formation through repetitive activities (Nunan, 2004)

Researchers have found out that using task-based activities can improve students' vocabulary learning and their confidence (Orawiwatnakul, 2011; Khabiri, & Charmgar, 2012). Some of task-based activities may include things such as assigning students to find out functions of words in different contexts, synonyms, antonyms, rewriting definitions, creating new sentences, or discussing the meaning of the same word in different sentences (Mokhtar, A. A. et.al. (2010).

In order to help learners acquire new English words, they need to be taught strategies for learning vocabulary. Graves (2010) suggests that learners need to learn about words not simply acquire them. Direct teaching of vocabulary learning strategies such as use of dictionaries, use of context clues, or identifying parts of words can help learners to become more independent learners (Baumann, et.al, (2003)

It is important to note that the emergence of new technologies has provided ELT with effective means and options of teaching language including vocabulary. Therefore, it is justifiable to suggest that multimedia software be utilized in language teaching. As pointed out by Yang and Chen (2007), learners will experience the joy of language learning if learning is facilitated with technology such as use of mobile phone, computer, or access to the internet. According to Chen & Chung, (2008), many researchers believe that electronic devices such as mobile phones can support both formal and informal learning and it is an important issue in English language education especially in EFL contexts (Taki & Khazaie, 2011).

Numerous studies on English vocabulary learning strategies have been conducted. To mention a few, are studies conducted by Tsai & Chang (2009), Loucky (2002), Dolati & Mikaili (2011), and Taki & Khazaeni (2011). Those studies, and others, have focused on learner strategies of learning vocabulary, effects of using dictionaries on vocabulary acquisition, effects of using games to facilitate students' vocabulary learning, or using cell phones or other mobile devices for teaching or learning vocabulary. In spite of new insights into teaching vocabulary and useful information from the various research, the contexts and settings of the studies have been confined to classroom experiments or cross sectional research.